SPECIAL THEME:
INDIAN STUDIES IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

Indian and Oriental studies in a Euro-Indian perspective for the 21st century

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Abstract. The basic presumption is the need in Oriental studies to go much further than mere description of different civilisations. They should be compared with our own, and the question of whether the concepts evolved by those civilisations can help us better understand the reality in which we actually happen to live should be asked. For the adoption of this approach to the study of South Asia, it is suggested that European and Indian civilisations are 'twins-unlike'. The paradox is intended since certain—so to say—general structural aspects of both civilisations are similar (geographical magnitude, variety of climate, size of population, and its anthropological, ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity), but as far as content is concerned they are of course very much unlike each other. The conclusion of our comparison is that Indian traditional civilisation is that of sustenance and containment while the European one is that of progress, development and expansion. Proper synergy of the two tendencies is postulated for sustainable development to be achieved.

Oriental Studies follow the pattern of investigation established in the 19th century. The duty of an Orientalist seemed so far to be best performed when he limited himself to presentation of factual aspects of the civilisations investigated. Yet, civilisation also has to be treated as a *subject* of investigation in the philosophical sense of the word. The research process should thus have the nature of a dialogue. A question should therefore be asked: what could the utility of the concept under investigation be for our own understanding of reality? Such enquiry is especially called for in the case of Indian civilisation. The common provenience of our languages and of the character of both European and Indian civilisations, which can be termed 'twins-unlike–civilisations', makes this study truly unique. Evaluating the 'twins unlikeness' of the two civilisations, the religious dimension cannot be overlooked. In this connection one aspect is of special interest. It is the assumption that the proper synergy of the Indian civilisation of *dharma,* i.e., sustainability and containment, and the European civilisation of progress, i.e., development and expansion, may ensure sustainable development. We shall return to this idea later on.

Let us take as the point of departure the assumption already mentioned above that Oriental Studies in general and Indian Studies in particular still overwhelmingly follow the pattern of investigation established in the 19th century. The attitude so characteristic of the scientist's bent of mind of that century still prevails. The sort of mental microscope has been our main research tool and many scholars would—I presume quite readily—endorse the viewpoint that our duty is best performed when we limit ourselves to precise presentation of merely factual aspects of the civilisations under investigation. We would not shrink the comparison to an entomologist investigating ants or bees and describing their behaviour.

No civilisation can be merely *an object* of enquiry and research, however. Not unlike a human being, it also has to be treated—to repeat—as a *subject* in a philosophical sense of the word, implying a sort of *personal* subjectivity. In such a case, the research process should be conducted in the form of a dialogue. In a way, a traditional Orientalist or Indologist is best prepared to do it. Philology is a unique and absolutely necessary tool to guarantee success. But it cannot remain the only one. When one investigates the concept of *pratītyasamutpāda* for instance, it is not enough to survey all the relevant texts, Tibetan and Chinese sources included. An answer to the question of what the utility of this concept is for our own better knowledge of the reality that surrounds us today, and not only for better knowledge of Buddhism alone, should permeate the research. After all, Buddhists are not unlike ourselves. It is not enough to describe faithfully their ways of thinking and behaviour. It is a must to build up awareness that Buddhist thought is part and parcel of universal human heritage and belongs, in equal measure, to all men. This should not be construed as implying conversion—not at all! It should be a process similar to the one that takes place in Europe. The French Revolution belongs to the history of French people. Yet, alas, in equal measure it belongs to the history of European people in the same way as the Russian one does. The Iliad and Odyssey are the heritage of the Greeks, but no one may ever deny that it is very much the heritage of all Europeans.

Indian studies acquire exceptional importance when considering the problem from such a perspective. It may still be difficult for many of us to think globally and even more difficult to feel global. But the idea of Indo-Europeanness or for that matter Euro-Indianness could be a convenient stepping stone towards becoming honestly global in our perception of the world.

The somewhat paradoxical formula that Europe and India are two twins-unlike (sic!) civilisations may be suggested as the main premise of this thesis. It can be substantiated by the fact that both geographical units are subcontinents of Asia of roughly speaking comparable size. The north-western subcontinent of Europe measures 10,529,000 square kilometres (*Encyklopedia* 1996). (Without Russia, Ukraine, and

Belarus it covers about 4,882,000 square kilometres.) The Indian subcontinent covers about 3,989,969 square kilometres.[1] While India is a compact landmass, Europe is a sort of peninsula interspersed with huge stretches of inland (NB! Mediterranean) waters.[2] The character of the lie of the land in both cases is equally varied, though the pattern of this variety is different. Climate again in both cases is equally varied but the average annual temperature differs immensely. In India (including Leh and Jaisalmer) the maximum summer temperature is about +26.80°C and the minimum winter temperature is about +18.10°C,[3] and in Europe the maximum summer temperature is +17.11°C and the minimum winter temperature is 8.08°C. The important difference is that in most of Europe for well over half a year, the climate is outright lethal for an unclad man. In India man has never been subjected to such climatic exigency. This is precisely what forced Europeans to look desperately for additional sources of energy and to use their entire ingeniousness to devise methods for its storage. This tendency as its ultimate achievement brought about the invention of nuclear energy. Meanwhile in India natural sources of energy have all along been sufficient to create sophisticated civilisation without the need to supplement them by any specially ingenious human effort.

In terms of population, both similarity and difference are hidden in the numbers. In both cases the order of magnitude is similar but the population of the Indian subcontinent is around three times that of Europe.[4] This difference in the distant past was not very pronounced, while later on it could certainly be attributed to the climate, which in India has always been more benevolent. Nowadays the population discrepancy may be attributed to the achievements of science an technology, which enable people in the West to enjoy sex without actually having to procreate and share their wellbeing with their progeny.

In the case of both subcontinents, the intermingling of population is comparable, although in India a strong preference for the continuity of traditional social institu-

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[1] South Asia is a sub-region of Asia comprising the modern states of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, members of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation [SAARC]. It covers about 10 percent of the continent, and is also known as the Indian subcontinent (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/>; accessed on 26-09-2010).

[2] *Encyklopedia* (1996) mentions 27 such inland seas.

[3] See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Climate> (accessed on 26-09-2010).

[4] The population of the Indian subcontinent [SAARC countries] is 1,549,348,689 (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/>; accessed on 26-09-2010). It is three times as large as that of Europe (513,000,000 (1994) without the European part of the erstwhile USSR (*Geograficzny atlas świata,* wyd. 6, Warszawa–Wrocław: PPWK, 1997). South Asia ranks among the *world's* most densely populated regions (388.31 per km²) About 1.3 billion people live there—about a third of all *Asians* and a fifth of all the people in the world (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/>; accessed on 26-09-2010).

tions based on the strict compartmentalisation of society makes social mobility much less intensive than in Europe. Ethnic differences are consequently more pronounced than in Europe. This is reflected in the dominant social systems in both cases. On the Indian subcontinent, it is the *varṇa-jati* social system, while on the European subcontinent it is the *national* social system.[5] Both systems are becoming less rigid, but in India, especially in rural areas, this process is much slower. Besides, in India the arrival of technological civilisation took place much later and did not come from within. Thus its social consequences will take more time to become evident.

Consequently, the population of the Indian subcontinent is ethnically more varied than that of the European one. In both cases the social hierarchy of different ethnic communities was originally acknowledged universally, preventing intermarriages, while the subsequent development of egalitarian ideas for the past 2 centuries has been more and more challenging to the status quo.

In both cases linguistic variety matches ethnic variety. In India it seems to be more pronounced than in Europe, for there we deal with at least four major language families, i.e., Indo-European (or Indo-Aryan), Dravidian, Tibeto-Burmese and Munda, while in Europe Indo-European definitely prevails. The number of speakers of the Finno-Ugric family is not many. To this we may add the large variety of scripts used in India and practically only the Roman script prevalent in most of Europe, with Cyrillic used by Russians, Ukrainians, Bulgarians and Serbs and the Greek alphabet prevalent in Greece and in the Greek part of Cyprus.

The sphere of customs and habits is of great variety in both cases, although it seems to be much greater and more pronounced in India than in Europe. Since this sphere concerns human relations, diet and attire, it may be noticed that in Europe, thanks to mass communication, it is undergoing considerable standardisation. This process—though much slower—is also underway in India. It may be hoped that as in Europe, what can be called local patriotism will become an antidote to this process of standardisation in India.

While evaluating the dissimilarities of the 'twin' civilisations, the religious dimension cannot be overlooked. The usual mistake committed by casual observers, is that they treat the most commonly professed religions on the two subcontinents—Hinduism in case of India and Christianity in case of Europe—as monoliths, while both are internally deeply differentiated. The basic difference between the two though is the historicity of Christianity and a-historicity of Hinduism. Yet, if ever Christians, under the influence of the late Pope John-Paul II, really accept Jews as their elder brethren in faith, even this difference will be no more. For God giving the Ten Commandments

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[5] Note the etymological identity of the terms. Both *jati* and *nation* are derived from verbal roots meaning 'to be born'.

to Moses can hardly be considered a strictly historical event and both Abraham and Moses as figures of the past are more reminiscent of Manu than of Alexander the Great. Important difference in attitudes characteristic of both religious systems is that Hinduism prefers introvert attitudes while Christianity favours extravert ones. By introvert attitudes we understand a tendency to look for ultimate Truth through introspection, meditation being the main tool, while Christians are ready to search the entire cosmos for it. Besides, Christianity is basically a proselytising religion while Hinduism in principle is not. Moreover, while Hinduism is still for many a way of life and not just a confession, Christianity is becoming more and more a sort of confession which for a growing number of people does not have a direct bearing upon their everyday life. According to Constantine Regamey from a philosophical viewpoint the Truth for the Western mind is a description and a definition of reality, while for the Indian mind it is identifying itself with reality. Thus the European mind is more concerned with what can be termed objective reality, while the Indian mind is more concerned with subjective reality or better the subjective perception of reality. The presence of Islam on the two subcontinents is a very important common factor. Yet, historically speaking the experience of Islam that the two civilisations have had is different but equally challenging. In both cases Islam has had a profound influence and in both cases it has been at times a very difficult relationship. Numerically speaking the presence of the followers of Islam on the European subcontinent and on the Indian one is not comparable. The intensity of the Muslim presence in Europe is growing, however, both in a positive sense (the prospective admission of Turkey into the EU) and in a negative one (in the form of the fundamentalist challenge to liberal European societies).

Now, if we consider history, both political and cultural, while tracing the similarities and differences, we can see that these two spheres also betray great similarities. Imperial tendencies towards political unification mark the history of both subcontinents of Asia with their characteristic landmarks. Equally outstanding are the memories of dissent and strife resulting in their political fragmentation. So far as the history of culture goes, in both cases the ancient classical heritage to a large extent determines the shape of the entire civilisation. It is the substratum for contemporary cultural developments. This substratum delineates the common value system and shared aesthetic sensitivity, thanks to which cultural goods can be shared in spite of the large variety of languages. The differences stem from the different perception of time: linear in the case of Europe and what is commonly called circular or spiral in the case of India. Both the time perception factor and average annual temperature factor in India result in the characteristic approach to treat continuity and preservation of the given conditions of existence as the main task of men, unlike in Europe

where the same factors prompt people to strive for change and to spare no effort towards the improvement of the conditions of their existence.

The European aesthetic sensitivity and perception of beauty are focused on the uniqueness of the work of art. Lack of originality appears to be largely a disqualifying factor. Meanwhile the Indian aesthetic sensitivity and perception of beauty consider beautiful that work of art which in its generalisation (*sādharanīkārana*) of emotional response makes one emotionally reach the edge of perceptive reality, beyond which there is nothing but undifferentiated Absolute. In such circumstances the originality of a work of art is not an issue. To the contrary, the more it resembles the best earlier specimen, the more enthusiastic is its reception.

Let us now add yet one more argument, namely that Indo-European linguists, by discovering the existence of the Indo-European family of languages, identified for us the common DNA of our civilisations (Byrski 2007). (Glory be for that to William Jones!) If most of the languages spoken in Europe and very many spoken in India grew from the same root, this should be treated by all of us as a special obligation to share the wisdom of our civilisations. It is exactly in this vein I would like to express my profound conviction that only the proper synergy of the Indian civilisation of *dharma*, i.e., sustainability and containment, and the European civilisation of progress, i.e., development and expansion, may ensure what is known today as sustainable development. This, to my mind, should be the overall goal of our work. In order to illustrate this idea with a concrete example, let us consider the case of desire. In India for the Hindus it would be *kāma* and for the Buddhists it would be *tṛṣṇa* in Sanskrit or *tanha* in Pali. The market economy cannot function without desire. Unbridled desire causing uncontrolled industrial development, exhaustion of natural resources, and unprecedented pollution may end in disaster, however. A powerful advertising effort is aimed at fanning up desire to such intensity as to unfasten the strings of our purses. Western civilisation seems to be completely unaware of the risks involved in such an approach. Of course we do know about environmental pollution of earlier unthinkable proportions and the greenhouse phenomenon being the consequence of development and expansion of industry. But we would shrink from acknowledging that it is the direct outcome of catering to the demands of our unbridled desire to acquire ever new and more sophisticated gadgets. Can Indian civilisation, geared to tame desire, suggest possible ways of solving this problem? Buddhism offers maybe too radical a solution by naming desire as the main culprit not only of pollution but also of all suffering and advocating its total extinction. Hinduism is more balanced in its approach for it; the Nāsadīya hymn of the *Ṛgveda* identifies *kāma* as the prime source of creation.[6] Since it is not possible to ascribe to the pre-creative Absolute,

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[6] *kāmas tad agre sam avartatādhi | manso retah prathamam yad āsīt | sato bandhum asati nir avindan | hṛdi pratīṣyā kavayo maniṣā* (*RV* X.129.4).

which is obviously characterised by absolute plenitude, a condition that would justify desire, the only possibility here is to treat it as a concept akin to the Christian idea of *caritas*. It is probably because of this interpretative difficulty that the *Manusmṛti* (II. 2 and 4) formulates a significantly more balanced view of *kāma*, yet still semantically more close to desire:

kāmātmatā na praśastā na caivehāsty akāmatā |
kāmyo hi vedādhigamaḥ karmayogaśca vaidikaḥ ‖ 2 ‖

'It is not praiseworthy to be permeated with desire but in this world nothing is bereft of desire. Desirable is competence in the Veda as well as in Vedic practices'.

akāmasya kriyā kācit dṛśyate neha kahiṅcit |
yad yad hi kurute kiṅcit tat tat kāmasya ceṣṭitam ‖ 4 ‖

'Nowhere can be seen any action of one who does not desire. Whatever he does, it is the doing of desire'.

The possible role of Christian thought in this predicament would be to draw the attention of the Hindus to the fact that in the case in hand it is not just desire. But it should be understood rather as love—the prime mover of the universe, much more akin to the Christian *caritas* than to the Buddhist *tṛṣṇa*. If we do something because we are prompted by true love, it is just and proper. This cannot be said of actions propelled by unrestrained desire or lust. Certainly unbridled consumerism is not an outcome of love. So, if we are prompted by desire alone, then it is the Buddhist attitude that would certainly be preferable, although—if rigorously followed—with disastrous consequences for the present economic system of the Western world.

This is, roughly speaking, the way that the role of Indian studies, in the years to come, may be envisaged. The give-and-take rapport between the two civilisations will be most profitable to both. We the Indologists have to convince first ourselves and then our compatriots that we will act more wisely, imbibing some of the wisdom of Indian civilisation. Concerning our Indian compeers, they are far ahead of us. The great Mahatma Gandhi is here a perfect example of one who with profound understanding tapped for the sake of his actions the wisdom of both civilisations, achieving an unprecedented success as an unquestioned moral authority for the entire world.

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